

Strengthening the Training Institute: The Importance of Gatherings for Reflection

In its message of Rıdván 2010, the Universal House of Justice called upon the believers and institutions to strengthen the institute process, the instrument critical to realizing the potential of local populations to create the “dynamics of an irrepressible movement.” In response to this call, over the past year the Counsellors, in close collaboration with the International Teaching Centre, convened gatherings of study circle coordinators to consider some of the issues related to the work of the institute at the cluster level. A number of such events, often referred to as institute seminars, were held around the world involving the participation of approximately 1,200 people drawn from over 500 of the most advanced clusters. Other participants in the seminars included Auxiliary Board members, representatives of institute boards, and, in some cases, of regional and national administrative bodies.

One of the principal objectives of the seminars was to strengthen the capacity of training institutes to organize reflection gatherings that would permit those serving as coordinators to review and share what they have been learning in the field. Major considerations included raising “the number of those capable of acting as tutors of study circles” and “the quality of the educational process fostered at the level of the study circle.” Activities such as study of the guidance of the House of Justice, review of the institute books, and field work, enabled the participants to further develop their capacity to operate in a learning mode: to consult purposefully, act systematically, and reflect effectively.

Role playing proved to be a highly effective tool in reviewing Ruhi Institute books and their practice components and in learning how to assist those studying the institute courses to initiate acts of service. Through visits to the field, the participants immediately put into practice what they were learning. The involvement of members of other institutions, especially Auxiliary Board members, demonstrated how valuable consultations with others collaborating at the cluster level are in fostering unity of vision, thought, and action.

In this issue, friends from different parts of the world share their experiences of consultation, action, and reflection at the institute seminars. They also relate how their insights from these gatherings are being applied to their efforts in their clusters. The stories illustrate how well-organized reflection can contribute to the strengthening of the institute process, “an instrument of limitless potentialities.”

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I. *Experiences during the Seminars:* *Participants in institute seminars share what they learned during the seminar about accompanying tutors, highlighting the value of visiting them in the field and having regular conversations with them about their work.*

Australia

For me, the institute seminar consolidated recent thinking about what it means to accompany someone. It helped shape the concept, role, and activities of an institute coordinator. Previously I was unsure about how to approach coordination tasks: What should a coordinator be doing?

At the seminar, I was taken on a journey, where everything was approached with a humble posture of learning—we weren't being given formulas to follow but rather patterns of activity to learn about and refine. This created a thirst and motivation to go back to my clusters and act, reflect, and learn!

Being able to study and explore some of the activities of a coordinator and immediately start learning about them by going into the field and putting them into action was such an amazing experience—at once so terrifying yet so exhilarating and empowering. I was thrown into the field of action, palms sweating, feeling unequipped because of what I felt was my limited understanding. But that wasn't the point—I was there to learn. Words can't describe the feeling of excitement as we would pour into the cars and head in different directions to put into action what we had studied. The field visits called for courage, reliance on God, and humility. I would be bursting at the seams to head back to the seminar, wanting to share my experiences and reflect with others about what we had learned. The understanding I had gained, the courage which I thought I never had, the bonds that were created by serving shoulder to shoulder with others, the love which I was shown by the friends we visited—for me these were the highlights of the seminar. Such in-depth reflection took place—such an unforgettable experience.

My understanding advanced exponentially when study and action were carried out simultaneously. This way of studying, acting, and reflecting was so effective for me to experience as a coordinator. It gave me insight into how a coordinator can encourage and support tutors and how a tutor can do the same for study circle participants.

Uganda

Another area that we learned about was visiting tutors and other friends who have completed Book 7. This has helped me know how to approach them and have meaningful discussions on the progress of the study circles they are facilitating and identify new insights and discuss what is to be done next. It has also helped me compare observations across various study circles and share them with other tutors. Furthermore, I learned about having one-on-one reflection with tutors on how to assess the participation and understanding being gained by study circle members. I have learned through consultations, reflection, and by attending the study circles, so that now I arrange my visits to those who have finished Book 7 around the concepts of identifying different ways to start a study circle, the mobilization of participants, and planning.

I also gained insights during the seminar about increasing the understanding of participants. This has helped me from the point of mobilization up to the start of a study circle, whereby the vision of a particular book is clearly conveyed to the participants during their first meeting. It is done in the form of an orientation about the material they are going to study and what is expected upon the completion of the course. It is also helpful to know their expectations as they start the book.

Role playing and field visits proved to be useful approaches in the gatherings and enhanced the learning experience of the participants.

Germany

Role plays and field work helped to translate study into action, and this concrete experience resulted in deeper understanding. The way role playing was used enhanced our learning because what we had consulted about in the seminar could then be seen by creating a real situation. The scenarios of the role plays were well-conceived with a clear purpose, which made the subsequent sharing of observations and insights very helpful.

Field work was key as well. One of the participants said that all the energy came from the field visits. Although the neighborhoods were in their initial stages of development, some had core activities going on. A few home visits could be arranged beforehand, while others came about without prior notice. We also participated in outreach and teaching, and follow-up visits came about naturally. Most of the participants seemed to be inspired by getting a sense of what community building could be. Equally useful was that some of them, depending on the kind of neighborhood they visited, also experienced the challenges involved.

Mongolia

Role plays are effective because facilitators can see how much of the topic still needs discussion. For example, when we were discussing paragraph 10 of the Riḍvān 2010 message and Unit 2, Section 21, of Book 7 (about respecting the knowledge people have at any given time and the dynamics of an irrepressible movement), they said that participants of study circles should speak more and that tutors should not be lecturers. Role playing showed that, in fact, the coordinators acting as tutors were doing the same as before—mainly they were speaking more than the participants and giving lectures rather than listening. After analyzing the results of the role play, it became clear that a tutor should not act in this way.

Field trips helped the participants see that the primary task of the coordinators during the next six months would be to meet with tutors in their homes, in study circles, and at tutor reflection gatherings, rather than sit in an office and call them to ask why a study circle was not going on. Since there were very few study circles in the host cluster, we could not visit even one. So we had to go and help the tutors in the cluster initiate study circles with their neighbors. At the same time, the coordinators practiced how to invite friends to Book 1. This skill had been forgotten, and after studying the Riḍvān 2010 message, the participants tried to use the appropriate language.

II. *Experiences in the Field following the Seminars:* *After returning to their clusters, the study circle coordinators organized tutor reflection gatherings in order to share the insights they had gained from the seminars and to offer similar opportunities for the tutors to reflect together and learn from one another.*

United States

At one seminar I learned so much about creating an environment conducive to reflection. The facilitators of the seminar modeled how to create such an atmosphere.

We, the participants, had many questions, but the facilitators always put the questions to the group and they let us explore the answers; hence, it was a collective learning rather than a “sage on the stage approach.” I also learned that facilitators provided a definite answer when necessary. So when I came back to my cluster, I followed this example by hosting a tutor gathering without any agenda—“just an opportunity for reflection.” We seated the tutors in a circle and started with study of the guidance and reflection questions on the challenges and successes of tutoring. I tried very hard to restrain myself from talking and answering questions, as it used to be my custom to talk too much and provide all the answers. I always reminded myself how the facilitators modeled and created a setting for reflection. The gathering went very well, and the participants learned from one another’s experiences and approaches. Plans were devised for how to increase more study circles. At the end of the gathering, I asked the tutors for feedback and one participant said: “This is one of the best tutor gatherings I have ever come to. I really felt like we did a lot of reflection and I learned a lot.”

Papua New Guinea

In Papua New Guinea, the cluster institute coordinator found that in addition to occasional meetings with the tutors to reflect on their work, much could be accomplished through visiting them in the field and having one-on-one conversations, reflecting on their work and assisting them to carry out the tasks associated with supporting a study circle.

After returning from the institute seminar, the national institute coordinator and I accompanied a tutor who was retaking Book 1 with the aim of improving the quality of his tutoring, to assist him to accompany his participants to do the practical component of the unit they were studying. After the study circle, the tutor, the national institute coordinator, and I reflected on the study circle.

Having a deeper appreciation for the impact of reflection, the cluster institute coordinator began to seek out opportunities for those engaged in the institute process to reflect on their actions together. At the tutor reflection meeting that he organized, the tutors studied paragraphs 1 and 9 from the introductory section, “To the Collaborators,” of Book 1 and paragraphs 7 to 10 of the Rıdván 2010 message. After the encounter, the cluster coordinator, working together with the national coordinator, visited some of those who had completed Book 7 to help them start their own study circles, in one case by providing assistance in finding participants. These efforts led to the immediate formation of a study circle with four youths.

When the coordinators visited a tutor whose Book 7 study circle had stopped some time before, they were able that same afternoon to visit the participants and arrange for the group to begin meeting again. The insights the coordinators gained through these visits were shared in a subsequent reflection meeting of tutors.

After visiting the tutors, helping them with the study circles, and having conversations with some friends who had completed Book 7, I organized a tutor encounter. The theme of the gathering was the concept of motivation. We discussed what motivates participants to attend study circles regularly, to have regular and effective study circles, and to help their participants carry out the practices and acts of service. Everyone at the encounter had finished Book 7; among them were the Auxiliary Board member, Local Spiritual Assembly members, and participants of one of the Book 6 study circles.

The participation of members of the local and cluster institutions in the tutor gathering has had positive results, generating a broad base of support for the institute process.

The Local Spiritual Assembly has stepped forward to assist the cluster institute coordinator, tutors, and participants and has allocated funds to support the work of the training institute. The Area Teaching Committee is fully supporting the cluster institute coordinator to assist the tutors in their acts of service. After consultation with the institutions, the believers in the cluster took the initiative to reach out to the wider community, especially their neighbors, and start their own activities.

Zambia

An Auxiliary Board member in Zambia shared his experiences of organizing a reflection gathering of cluster coordinators over two successive weekends.

There were over 30 people present, bringing together tutors from two clusters. The refresher/reflection was participatory in nature, as we broke into small groups for discussion and practice. While some of the tutors were initially shy, they began to open up as the first weekend proceeded. Developing the skill of expressing ourselves in reflections is a process that we must consciously pursue. The weekend served as a very important beginning for creating bonds between tutors, and opportunities for reflection, where we could learn from one another's experience and gain insights. It became clear that while there were many who had finished Book 7, there was a mix of those who felt they could manage to tutor a study circle and those who felt they needed more support to do so. By the end of the weekend, the tutors were paired, which hopefully will assist in the sustainability of the study circles. The refresher/reflection served as an opportunity for those who were less experienced to gain courage and conviction that they could do it! Role playing and field visits were key. Role playing helped everyone—those who felt they knew how to invite people to a study circle and those who were not so sure.

From the first weekend, we have a total of 20 tutors who are now committed to study circles that were initiated during our field visits. A total of 11 new study circles have been formed—and with the ongoing ones, we are now at the highest number of study circles we have ever had in any cycle. The active participation of a large contingent of tutors, all with the aim of learning to facilitate Book 1 more effectively, was a highlight for me. It is so encouraging to see some of the friends who have never before served as tutors now begin to start study circles.

A participant in the tutor gatherings described above explains how the experience she gained gave her the courage to invite her neighbors to a study circle and how she felt more capable of creating the environment envisioned in the institute courses.

I attended a two-weekend tutor gathering where we reflected on how to tutor Book 1 and practiced facilitating the book together. We went through the book, identified themes, looked through some of the questions that invite discussion, and consulted on how we handle such situations. We practiced what to say when inviting someone to a study circle, what information we would give to remove obstacles, and what concepts we would share regarding service. The reflection helped me gain knowledge, skills, and attitudes that prepared me to facilitate a study circle in a way that fostered understanding in a spiritual environment.

The Book 1 review not only refreshed what I had learned when I studied it a long time ago but also provided a channel for my deep longing to serve the Faith (which had not been materializing). It helped me become more confident to start a study circle. Part of the program was to go out and practice what we had learned, that is, to actually go and find participants. So my study circle was born from this exercise. I found my participants among our neighbors and their contacts.

Many factors contributed to the success of my study circle. First, the tutor reflection refreshed my spirit and gave me the chance to develop the language to describe what Book 1 is. Second, friendships developed and the participants felt comfortable with each other. There was joy and laughter and food. Great emphasis was placed on putting into action what the participants learned, such as praying, reading the Writings, and of course serving.

Another important aspect of the study circle was the practice component. We went out to visit Bahá'í friends to share a prayer. The visit was great. The task was divided into three parts: introduction, discussion of what prayer is, and sharing the prayer itself. It went so well that there was an exchange of ideas between the participants and the Bahá'ís we visited. It was so natural that other prayers and passages from the Writings were shared and recited. One participant decided to facilitate Book 1 for all of us and did it with excellence. It was a wonderful practice! In the end, two of the participants declared as a result of our study circle.

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